

A Native Archaeology of the Island Hul'qumi'num: Cowichan Perception and Utilization of Wetlands

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Abstract

The aim of this research is to develop an understanding of historic Cowichan perception and utilization of wetlands in their traditional territory. The Cowichan live on the south east coast of Vancouver Island on the Northwest Coast of North America, in an area with many wetland features. The story of Cowichan culture history is currently characterized, through archaeological work, as marine oriented. However, archaeological research to date does not represent the full history of the Cowichan people.

This research sets out to re-balance the cultural history of the Cowichan, through the qualitative and quantitative analysis of all available sources that identify economic and social orientation in Cowichan culture history, in particular those coming from archaeology, ethnography and oral tradition. As a way of integrating these diverse sources, a 'Native archaeology' is developed. This is an approach, which places equal value on etic (cultural outsider) and emic (cultural insider) created sources, and seeks to identify areas of similarity and difference in order that a fuller understanding of the culture may be reached. By applying the Native archaeological approach to Cowichan culture history, the marine orientation is placed in the context of the role of riverine wetlands, which was important both in terms of subsistence and of the symbolic significance that these places have in the self-reflected identity of the Cowichan. In this way, a story is told that is meaningful to both Cowichan Natives and non-Natives alike.

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